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IWU Students Work to 'Wow' Employers at Internship Fair

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Resume tucked neatly in binder? Check. Suit pressed and clean? Check. Smile eager but not creepy? Check. Palms sweaty? Well, maybe, just a little.

Welcome to the Illinois Wesleyan University Internship Fair, where students attempt to 'wow' employers in 30 seconds or less for the opportunity to gain work experience and maybe even meet a celebrity or two.

Employers ranged from global companies like Caterpillar Inc. to small businesses such as Simple Elegance Events and Wedding Designs. This year more than 50 employers and 239 students participated in the fair.

Many organizations host interns because they need the extra help in day-to-day operations, although others look at internship programs as a way to identify great talent for future employment.

"We view interns' experience with us as a 12-week job interview," said Ashley McClintock, university relations manager in HR Employment Operations for GROWMARK, Inc. Historically, about 50 percent of GROWMARK's interns will be offered full-time jobs, said McClintock, noting GROWMARK's internship program is in its 54th year. "The experience with us is an opportunity for the interns to determine if they can see themselves having a career with us, in addition to us determining if they fit in with our company."

At Illinois Wesleyan's fair, McClintock was looking for intern candidates with enthusiasm, a passion to learn, and leadership experience on campus, with prior internship experience a big plus. "We're looking for self-starters," said McClintock. "We can teach you about our business, but intangibles like initiative must be there already."

Getting work experience early and often is becoming more common, according to administrators at IWU's Hart Career Center. "Students tend to be interested in internships earlier in their college careers, and they are often completing multiple internships," said Laurie Diekhoff, assistant director/internship coordinator at the Hart Career Center.



Caterpillar representative and alumna Le Ann McQuellon '99 (left) speaks with Leo Martinez '15.



Amy Seter '15, left, is greeted by Beth Connelley of Growmark at the IWU Internship Fair.

Among the student participants was Kinzie Schweigert '15. A sophomore English writing major from Bourbonnais, Ill., Schweigert came to the Internship Fair planning to be one of those "early and often" students. She hoped to lay the groundwork for securing an internship in communications or public relations for the spring semester. Stepping up to the table of the Normal CornBelts baseball team, Schweigert immediately mentioned she's the current sports editor for the *Argus*. "I know the style of writing you need," she told the CornBelts representative.

Schweigert visited the tables of five organizations, and each seemed impressed with her initiative of interning as a sophomore. At the table of

the Illinois State University Athletics Department, Schweigert opened with her sports writing experience but quickly segued into her skills in the Photoshop and InDesign computer programs after discovering earlier in the evening that employers highly value writers who can also design flyers or simple direct mail pieces.

At the table of 107.7 the Bull, a country radio station in Normal, Schweigert chatted with the representative as a former intern stopped by. "It's an awesome place," the former intern said of the station. "I got to meet Dierks Bentley, which was pretty cool."

Afterward, Schweigert noted the fair offered a number of good opportunities. "I'll follow up with emails to everyone I met," she said before dashing off to volleyball—she plays outside hitter on the Titan women's team. "One of the people I met said to just call their office to schedule an interview. I think that will be a great internship."

Securing an internship can be as competitive as getting a permanent, full-time job. GROWMARK receives hundreds of applications from students at about 40 institutions for its 55 to 60 summer internships, McClintock said. The Children's Discovery Museum (CDM) in Normal normally receives about 50 resumes for the 8 to 10 intern slots, according to Shelly Hanover, volunteer and intern coordinator. The museum seeks interns to help out as camp assistants, in educational programs, and to help plan and execute special events. "We're looking for someone who is engaging, who reaches across the table to connect with us," said Hanover. She noted that probably 95 percent of the museum's 40 full- and part-time employees started out either as interns or volunteers.

Now in its 17th year, the intern program at the CDM is critical, said Hanover. "The quality of the programs we offer is enhanced by our interns," Hanover said. "We could not fulfill our mission of reaching the number of students we do or serving the patrons who come in the door without these young people."

Diekhoff said employers seem to be increasing the number of internship opportunities after a few years of being cautious or even trimming programs. In the 2011-12 academic year, IWU students reported 462 internships, an increase of 12 percent over 2010-11. "Students are definitely getting the message that internships are important," Diekhoff.

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